The Impact of the Internet on Politics: The "Net Effect" on Political Campaigns and Elections

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ABSTRACT

The Internet is now one of the most popular media outlets for campaigning and elections, and may soon be used for electronic voting. The scope of this paper is to examine the impact of the Internet on American politics relative to campaigns and elections by conducting the relevant literature review and synthesis. It will attempt to follow the progression of the Internet’s role in politics, and identify both positive and negative impacts. It will assess what the Internet has changed, and conversely, what it has not changed and study the impact of the Internet in terms of candidates, strategists, media, citizens, and activists.

Keywords: E-Government, E-Politics, Internet and Elections, Net Effect on Political Campaigns, Online Fundraising

INTRODUCTION

The role of the Internet in government has grown exponentially over the last decade. It is broad and encompassing. The Internet serves as an important tool for everyday citizens to communicate with elected officials at all levels of government. Communications may deal with current policy, suggestions about new legislation, or any matter related to the workings of government. As the role of the Internet in government has grown, so has its role in the American political process. The business of campaigning and elections has found a convenient and affordable home on the World Wide Web. Each campaign cycle since 1994 has generated its own Internet story. It started in 1994 with the appearance of the first campaign web site by Senator Diane Feinstein. In 1998, Jesse Ventura conducted a gubernatorial campaign that featured email communications, and in 2000, presidential hopeful John McCain showed how candidates could raise a lot of money online, and showcased the power of the Internet as a source of political news and information. The presidential race of 2004 marked the cornerstone for Internet politics with the innovative use of the Internet by the Howard Dean campaign.

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elections, and may soon be used for electronic voting. The scope of this paper is to examine the impact of the Internet on American politics relative to campaigns and elections. A review of the literature from the period 1999 to the present will be conducted to show the differing opinions and changing trends in assessing the impact of the Internet on the political process. It will attempt to follow the progression of the Internet’s role in politics, and identify both positive and negative impacts. It will assess what the Internet has changed, and conversely, what it has not changed. This paper will address e-politics in USA only, (even though the Internet is playing a major role in the politics of many foreign nations) and will study the impact of the Internet in terms of candidates, strategists, media, citizens, and activists.

There has been much discussion on just how much the Internet has impacted politics and elections, and what these impacts really amount to. Pundits agree that the Internet will have some influence, but they disagree on how much. Some say the “Net effect” will be little because the Internet is simply another communications channel, while others say the Internet could influence enough undecided voters to tip the balance in a close race (Britt, 2007). Over the last decade, we have seen a correlation between the maturity of the Internet and the extent to which it is used in the political process. It has become a popular medium for candidates, activists, journalists and citizens alike. Despite this growth, there are still conflicting opinions/findings as to what the real impact of the Internet is on the American political system. Does the Internet promote a “participatory” vision of democracy and does this new technology therefore enable a wider range of citizens to become involved in the political process? Does the Internet fundamentally change political institutions? Experts continue to debate these questions to determine whether the Internet does serve to promote democracy for both candidates and the electorate, and whether it truly influences final voting outcomes. It is realistic to say that the Internet does not create an entirely new political order, since it is leveraged within the framework of existing institutions, but it does provide a new and enhanced platform for organization, communication, and collaboration in campaigns and elections.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND SYNTHESIS

A review of the literature from the period 1999 to the present shows the differing opinions and changing trends in assessing the impact of the Internet on the political process. The literature shows a general correlation between the maturity of the Internet and its impact on the political process. Where the earlier literature takes a more conservative view of the role of the Internet in politics, much of the literature written between 2002-2004 begins to show the growing influence of the Internet in politics. By 2004 and beyond, most literature describes the maturing Internet and the larger role it plays in the American political process.

E-government is the use of Internet technology and ecommerce to deliver information and public services to citizens, business partners and suppliers of government entities, and people who work in the public sector. There are three categories, i.e., G2C, G2B and G2G.

In G2C (Government to Consumer), government agencies use the Internet to provide services to citizens such as Social Security and pension payments, directly to recipients’ bank accounts or to smart cards.

In G2B (Government to Business), governments use the Internet to sell to or buy from businesses to ensure the best price for government procurement of goods and services. Electronic tendering systems using reverse auctions are becoming mandatory, to ensure the best price for government procurement of goods and services.

G2G includes intra-government EC (transactions between different governments) as well as services among different governmental agencies (Turban & Volonino, 2010).

E-government improves the efficiency and effectiveness of government functioning,
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